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ABSTRACT

South Africa's University of the Western Cape developmental program in English as a second language is described and discussed. The program was designed to improve the academic achievement of native Afrikaans-speaking first-year students by improving their English competence. The students are a high-risk subgroup of students in a general developmental English course. In its history of less than two years, the experimental program has improved the course passing rate and the student retention rate and caused an increase in research and experimentation with methods, materials, and testing. The small-group instruction, communicative emphasis, high-quality staff, and additional resources are seen as distinct program advantages. Areas of concern include the influence of frequent boycotts on and off campus, the need for additional space and human and other resources, perceived pressure to produce results, the need for clarification of objectives and emphases, and the need for some syllabus redesign. Recommendations include exploration of new instructional and testing materials and further research concerning the results of this program and comparisons with other, similar programs. A description and analysis of the screening test used for the program are also included. (MSE)

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REPORT ON THE BASIC ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS PROJECT (BELS)

Submitted by: Carol A. Puhl, Ph.D

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August 23, 1985

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SOURCES OF THIS REPORT:

Extensive meetings (daily) with Paul H. Tucker, Project Leader

Extensive meetings (almost daily) with the two lecturer/researchers in the BELS Project, Ann Pelser and Julie-Anne Justus

Meetings with project statiscian John Fresen

Meetings with English Special Lecturers Jan Swanepoel and Sylvia Roodt

Meetings with Department Head Stanley G. Ridge

Four sessions of in-class observations of the BELS experimental group (before the student boycott)

Informal meetings with other English Department lecturers

DOCUMENTS REVIEWED:

The BELS Project (Argument and Scope)

BELS Project Interim Report, June 1984

BELS Project Interim Report, 10 June 1985

BELS Project: Activity Analysis and Time Allocation 1984 (researchers)

English Special: Department of English, Information for Students: 1985

English Special 1984: Order Division and Time Allocation of Work

English I: Language Course, for 1981, 1982, 1984

English I: Department of English, Information for Students: 1985

Some materials for English I and English Special

Screening Test

Mid Term and Final Exams for English Special

Pelser, Ann. "The Basic English Language Skills Project at the University of the Western Cape: Suggestions for Syllabus, Methods, and Materials." Unpublished dissertation, University of Natal, Durban. 1984

Report of the Rector, 1984, University of the Western Cape

Calendar 85, Part III, Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape

I. OVERVIEW

This report begins with the context of the university and the department in which the BELS Project is situated. Its many strengths, some concerns, and general recommendations are given. An analysis of the Screening Test is done as a preliminary to further statistical analysis and study of the test

A. The University

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) offers education on several levels; the core is a three-year program leading to diplomas and degrees in seven fields. Students who qualify by earning a good academic record can take the fourth year, an honors year, leading to the B.A. Hons. or the B.S. Hons. degrees.[1] Post graduate work is offered in six areas.

The University was established in 1959[2] specifically for persons classified by the government as "coloured", after such persons were permitted to attend government-classified "white" universities in limited numbers and by permit only. Currently the admission policy is open at UWC, which means that any person is accepted who has passed his or her matriculation course, Standard 10 of high school. The student body, two-thirds male,[3] is mainly "coloured", with few "blacks" or "whites." Most speak Afrikaans as their first language. Most classes are conducted in Afrikaans, with exceptions such as, of course, the English Department. Most students live with their parents (c. 60%), some are boarders[4] (c.30%), and some reside on campus (c.10%). The cost per student[5] for 1984 was R4 606, with bursaries available.

The University attained full autonomy on 1 April 1984.[6] Its enrollment for that year was 5 078 undergratuates and 691 graduates.[7] Expenditures excluding capital works for 1984 totaled R21 000 000. Most funds by far come from state subsidies

1-8. Report of the Rector, 1984, UWC

The University is experiencing continued rapid growth, so that resources, both human and physical plant, are severely strained.

B The BELS Project

The purpose of the BELS Project is to find ways in the context of the South African university to increase the academic success of first-year students by improving their language competence, thus reducing the failure rate in English Special and other courses so that they do not need to repeat the year, thereby eliminating fruitless expenditures of scarce educational funds.

As aninstructional experiment innovative both at the University of the Western Cape and in tertiary education in South Africa, BELS needs to be studied in the context of the Department of English at UWC, specifically in its relationship to English Special.

English Special is a year-long, two-semester, one-credit course equivalent to English I and differing from it in that it is taught for practical professional and academic purposes rather than literary purposes. It does not usually lead to English II. All students accepted at the University can take English I or English Special, though not all degree or diploma courses require English. Either course meets the English requirement where it exists. Students themselves decide which course to take. The BELS project concerns a subgroup of English Special.

Before beginning university work, most first-year students (c.2000) take the Screening Test during Orientation Week, with a few being tested in opening classes. Of those students, some enroll in English Special (c.300), and of those students, some, based on their Screening Test

results, are invited to participate in the BELS project, which they readily do. These students come from the high-risk group between those who are expected to pass and those who are expected to fail, based on their Screening Test scores and previous years' pass rates. In previous years, 35% of students passed English Special. This percent of incoming students is expected to pass (probably-pass group). The next level forms the BELS group, those who probably will not pass but may be close. The third level are not expected to pass (probably-fail group), though of course the opportunity to pass is there for them. The probably-pass and probably-fail group are given English Special as it is generally taught, by large-group lecture and large-group workshop methods. The BELS group contains 120 students, seen as those who could pass given different instruction, small-group lecture and workshop methods. Sixty of these students comprise the experimental group receiving special instruction, and the other sixty comprise the control group, who are receiving English Special as it is generally taught. For 1985, there are two lecturers for 60 BELS experimental-group students and three lecturers for 224 first year students and 160 students repeating the course, in all a total of 444 students.

II. STRENGTHS OF THE PROJECT

A. Improved student pass rate. In the first semester of 1984, the experimental group had a higher pass rate, 52% vs. 21%. For the first semester of 1985, the pass rate was 43% vs. 20%, experimental to control group. Students in a group expected to fail are actually passing.

B. Increased student retention rate. In the first semester of 1984, the experimental group had fewer dropouts than the control group, 8% vs. 20%.

C. The conceptualization of the project is excellent. It seems reasonable to achieve. In reducing failures, money is saved and more prepared persons are available in the professional work force. Such teaching should eventually pay for itself. It will also reduce frustration on the part of faculty and students, and make university education available to those for whom it has been in a realistic way beyond reach.

D. The energy, competence, and dedication of the BELS team.

E. Highly prepared and appropriate lecturers/researchers. They bring in additional ideas, experiences, and perspectives.

F. Development of the English Department is proceeding through exploration and implementation of new methods and materials. After the research aspects of the project are complete (1987), English Special may then be taught along the lines pioneered by BELS.

G. Department emphasis on communicative competence. It seems well diffused in the thinking of the lecturers, especially the BELS lecturers. Some reorientation still seems in process. The thoroughness of the department's approach is admirable, possibly a model for other departments that teach university English.

H. Implementation and good functioning of a Screening Test for placement purposes.

I. New resources added, such as A-V equipment, lab materials, and teaching materials.

J. Development of more precise testing within BELS.

1. Diagnostic Testing - to further assess English needs of students in the BELS experimental group

2. Skills Tests - to divide instruction into more manageable units and test each unit for success.

The Diagnostic Test is done in draft for 1986. Work on the Skills Tests is in progress. Implicit in these tests is a more precise formulation of objectives in terms of student desired behaviours.

K. Research that will emanate, and is emanating, from the project.

L. Small-group teaching, one lecturer for 30 students. Instructors know students personally. This is a huge help in retention, especially with high-risk students. Instructors know and can teach to individual students' needs.

III. POINTS OF CONCERN.

A. Frequent and extensive boycotts are a fact of life in the larger university and in the society. While those charged with teaching must adapt, this factor reduces the time-on-task available for instruction of students and for BELS students, who need it most.

B. More secretarial help is needed.

C. More data processing help is needed.

D. More communication of project goals and progress would be useful; half of a good project is telling the world about it. Additional support for Mr Tucker is needed here.

E. More time and resources are needed to mine the wealth of data available from the project. Project Leader Mr Tucker has not only kept meticulous records of virtually all student data gathered, but has it on the computer in retrievable form. Many related research questions could be explored using this data. Some areas may be: test analysis; test scores as pass predictors for various subgroups of English Special; the Screening Tests as a predictor of academic success for those some 2000 first-year students tested and who did not take English Special. Many more questions of use to the University could be explored from this existing pool of data.

F. There is inadequate space for teaching and storing of materials (although plans to remedy this situation are firm for next year).

G. There is some professional semi-isolation of the BELS lecturers from colleagues in the English Department, resulting in some demoralization. This semi-isolation seems necessary in order to keep the research design intact; however, it still is an uncomfortable position to be in. The researchers may need to look to students and to colleagues in other universities engaged in similar professional concerns for satisfaction and support.

H. The two researcher/lecturers need more support for their research products, such as papers and workshops at conferences. They are not helped in this matter by the tendency toward isolation from the department. It might help to meet occasionally and informally and talk only research. It might help if they could connect with others, maybe at UCT, doing similar work. Writing is a lonely process, and support is very helpful, especially for beginning researchers.

I. Some pressure is felt by the BELS lecturers to produce results in the face of many factors beyond the control of instruction, such as the socio-economic situation of students.

J. There is some indication that literature selections studied may not be of greatest interest to students. Further exploration is needed, perhaps input from students.

K. There seems to be some ambiguity in the English Special course about the place of the oral skills, listening and speaking. They are not tested, so students will not give much importance to them. They may be developed in a way as a by-product in the development of reading and writing skills, and indeed, as a very useful prelude to written work. Ann Pelser has outlined this procedure in her dissertation. Her skills orientation is particularly useful, especially as outlined on page 11. The concept of goal-oriented communication as she describes it is central for students to learn to deal with other language variables that amount to a university-defined level of communicative competence.

L. Specific procedures are not obvious, though within the scope of the project, for monitoring the progress of BELS experimental and control students from 1984 in English and other subjects as they progress through the university. Perhaps in the June 1986 report.

M. How does the experimental group of 1984 compare with the control group in passing other courses (end of semester one, 1985) and in passing the year?

N. How do the two BELS groups compare with the group of students who scored above them in the Screening Test (probably-pass) and the group who scored below them (probably fail) regarding retention rate and pass rate?

IV. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Keep up the good work.

B. As cross-fertilization of ideas is always useful, send as many project team members as feasible to study related projects abroad or in other universities in the country. Because the U.S. has been grappling with these issues seriously for 20 years, and because of the testing as conducted in American higher education, the U.S. is the recommended place. Explore with the American Center for both short and long term grants. And look for funds from other sources.

C. Places: University of San Diego, where John Waterhouse is located. City University of New York (CUNY). Others to be identified.

D. Explore whether any standardized tests for diagnostic and/or placement purposes are becoming available in the South African context.

E. Possibly explore the use of interactive English materials using Plato and/or microcomputers. Software is increasingly available for purchase.

F. Devise some method of keeping track of on-going progress of students in the BELS experimental group on an individual basis in a way that is clear to the students as well as to the instructor. Maybe:

1. a folder for each student
2. a chart with student names
3. a log of each instructor/student contact, noting difficulty that student needs help with and suggested solution.

G. Keep formulating clear objectives in terms of desired students behaviours to guide the process of testing and instruction.

H. Consider building into instruction small-group discussions as emphasized by Pelser for generating spontaneous language as well as for analyzing the sender-receiver relationship as a base for evaluating appropriate language to be used. Organizing these pre-writing activities would be greatly enhanced by use of small-group dynamics. Had student been in classes, she and I had planned for me to teach such a lesson.

I. Strongly encourage Pelser to present a paper or workshop, eventually for a publication of her own, from her dissertation as applied to high-risk students.

V. SCREENING TEST

A. Qualitative Analysis

The Screening test was created by four lecturers in the English Department, with major input from one of the BELS researchers. It was given during Orientation Week to approximately 1460 students in 1984, of which about 250 registered for English special, and to approximately 2200 students in 1985, of which 284 registered for English Special. Test results were reported in the form of a single numerical score which was used to identify the BELS experimental and control groups.

The test is constructed as follows:

Section A - 1: COMPREHENSION (literal)
Passage with nine multiple choice items
Weighted by 4

Section A - 2: COMPREHENSION (inferential)
Passage with six multiple-choice items
Weighted by 4

Section B: Paragraph Building
Six sentences which the student must put in paragraph order. Each sequence is counted as a link, hence there are five links
Weighted by 3

Section C: SENTENCE COMPLETION
Passage with verbs deleted, then supplied in infinitive form for students to write the correct form. 15 items
Weighted by 3

Section D - 1: (1985 only) VOCABULARY
Sentence with underlined word to be defined.
Multiple choice. 10 items

Section D - 2: (1985 only) VOCABULARY
Sentence with underlined word. Student must give its opposite. Multiplechoice. 5 items

Section D - 3: (1985 only) VOCABULARY
Verbs in infinitive form. Definitions to be selected from a list of eight verbs in infinitive form. 5 items

TOTAL POSSIBLE WEIGHTED SCORE, 1984: 120

TOTAL POSSIBLE WEIGHTED SCORE, 1985: 140

Because of the need to obtain results in 2-3 days, no writing sample was included.

Comments from a qualitative perspective:

Strong points:

1. The test has 35/55 items (the first number is for the 1984 version, the second for the 1985 version), which offer many opportunities for correct answers.

2. There is a variety of tasks, 4 types in 1984, 6 types in 1985.

3. Scoring is objective, relatively easy, and speedy.

4. The passages chosen seem relevant for persons living on the continent of Africa, in the country, and in the Cape area.

5. The test is about 1/2 reading comprehension.

6. The key skills for English Special are examined: reading (comprehension, vocabulary) and writing (paragraph building and sentence completion).
(See comments on paragraph building below.)

7. Some attention to within-sentence language maybe seen in the inclusion of vocabulary and sentence completion.

8. The items after the reading passages do indeed appear to be literal (section A) and interential (Section A-2, except No.5).

9. The comprehension section seems very close in format and type to later testing during the year and it seems to sample at least some of the skills taught in the course.

Points of Concern:

1. Some sections may have greater utility than others in contributing to the final test scores especially the earlier sections. Statistical analysis may show whether this is so.

2. An item analysis is needed to determine which items are actually giving placement information. Items which do not give such information should be deleted, thus shortening the test.

3. It seems that the more directly a skill is tested, the better. Section B, Paragraph Development, seems more a reading than a writing skill, in that it requires utilization of language cues already present within the sentences to reconstruct the correct paragraph.

4. There is not much writing tested. If placement remains the sole or major use of the test, then no problem.

5. The relationship of test items to instruction is unclear. This test seems to contain a wealth of diagnostic information that could be examined and related to student work, e.g., inferential reading skills. Using this diagnostic information for student benefit would seem to maximize both student and instructor time spent in taking and scoring the test.

6. The relationship of this test to the exit test of English Special is unclear. It seems they should be more similar, if at all feasible, or at least a study of how these two tests are alike and different should be done.

In some sense the Screening Test functions as a pre-test (given before the "treatment", or year of instruction) and the English Special final exam functions as a post-test (given at the end of "treatment", or year of instruction). The more similar they are to each other, the better the effects of the treatment will show up. Although the specific effects of the treatment are not sought in this research project, and the project will function as designed without the information yielded by pre/post-test measurement, this type of information relates to instruction. Having it may help to connect testing and instruction more directly, an issue more of ongoing departmental concern than project concern. Such measures could usefully be built into future research.

B. Statistical Analysis

At meetings beginning 20/08/85 with project statistician John Fresen, questions to be explored statistically were limited based on time and data immediately available. The basic question asked was: How well does the Screening Test seem to function as a placement test? To address this question, the relationship of the Screening Test Scores and the End-of-Year Marks for students finishing English Special in 1984 were analysed by means of a logistic regression conducted by Fresen. Results are presented in Figures 1 and 2, following pages.

The next four paragraphs and Table 1 were written by Fresen in order to interpret the statistical results.

Figure 1 is a scatter plot of End-of-Year result Y (on the vertical axis) against the Screening Test score X (on the horizontal axis). This plot reveals a strong relationship between the two results: on average, a high pass rate is experienced by students who get high marks for the Screening Test. A low pass rate is experienced by students who get low marks for the Screening Test. The expected or average pass rate in terms of the Screening Test score is given in Table 1.

Screening Test Score	10	20	30	40	50	60	70
Expected or Average Pass Rate	2%	4%	9%	18%	33%	52%	71%

Applying this information to future results, a plot of the expected pass rate against the Screening Test score is given in Figure 2.

These results do not include those persons who dropped out of the course or who for some reason were not awarded an end of year mark.

It must be emphasized that these results can only be applied to a group and not to an individual. It is quite possible for a person with a Screening Test score of 32 to obtain a higher final mark than a person with a screening test score of 64. This is evident in Figure 1, where it is indeed shown to have happened.

FIGURE 1: Scatter plot of End-of-Year result (vertical axis) vs SCREENING TEST RESULT (Horizontal axis) for English Special students in 1984.

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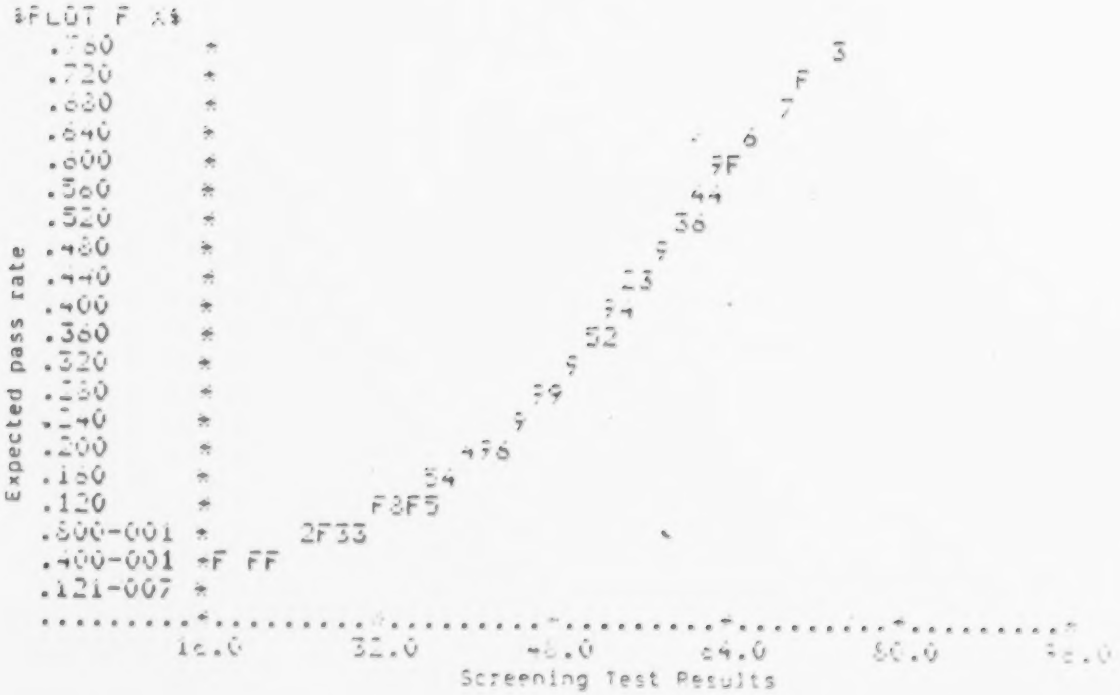

FIGURE 2:

•Plot of the Expected Pass Rate (on vertical axis) against Screen Test score (horizontal axis)

Note the symbol "F" denotes a fitted point; a numeral indicates a multiple of the fitted point

However, in a hypothetical group of 100 students all with a Screening Test score of 32, we expect 10 to obtain a pass (50% or above) for the end of the year. But we cannot say which 10. By contrast, in a group of 100 students, all with a Screening Test result of 64, we expect 60 to pass. Again, we cannot predict which particular student will pass.

Further questions that could be asked of the Screening Test

1. How well does the Screening Test function as a placement test with regard to these groups:

   (a) The Bels experimental group
   (b) The control group
   (c) Other students in English Special

2. How do various sections of the Screening Test representing Comprehension (Section A), Paragraph Building (Section B), Sentence Completion (Section C), and Vocabulary (Section D, 1985 only) contribute to the total Screening Test score?

   (a) for 1984
   (b) for 1985

3. Determine a reliability coefficient.

4. Determine validity: is it measuring what it is supposed to be measuring? (Student chances of success in English Special)

5. What are the margins of error of the cutoff points for placement?

6. Explore the possibility of using the section scores of each student for diagnostic purposes.

7. Determine central tendency of the overall test and its sections (mean, median)

8. Determine variability of the test (range).

9. Do an item analysis to determine which are the better items, and which to delete.

10. To what extent does it really measure existing student ability in English?

11. How does the Screening Test relate to:

    (a) Instructor perceptions and data concerning student progress
    (b) First semester exam
    (c) Within-semester tests
    (d) Students who drop out
    (e) Students who do not take English Special

12. What do the students think of the test?

The pattern of results so far indicate that the Screening Test is effectivein its purpose, that is, identifying students who are expected to have difficulty in passing the English Special course. Thus it seems that indeed the right students are in the BELS project, with one hesitation, that of the margin of error of the test. With the margin, the cutoff scores determining who is in BELS can be implemented as a range rather than as a discrete point. The practical application of this refinement should be further explored, perhaps with the project statiscian, among others.

These analyses are only the beginning. More must (and will) be done as the statistician's time becomes more available.

To conclude this section it must be noted that Mr. Tucker and the BELS team deserve a great amount of credit for the Testing Developments implemented to date.

Recommendations Regarding the Screening Test

1. Statistical analysis was done on the 1984 version of the test. It seems to be working well, as results so far indicate. In so far as tests of vocabulary generally have the least predictive power, I would suggest deleting these tests (Section D) unless further statistical analysis shows them to be useful.

2. The analyses done are preliminary. They should be followed up as soon as is feasible.

3. The test is now institutionalized to some extent in Orientation Week. I would keep it there beyond the life of the BELS project and make it work for the English Department in adapting instruction to student needs. Perhaps some counseling of students could be started (by the student services division, not by the English Department) to help students see their chances of success and make realistic decisions regarding their choices. As the use of placement testing appears to be rare in this country (and indispensible in the U.S.), the entrenchment of the Screening Test could prove to be a very useful innovation for the wider University in general.